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ABSTRACT

The group syntality concept of Raymond B. Cattell furnishes a useful framework for teaching parliamentary procedure. Although there are contrasts between the histories, subject matters, and perspectives of the areas of parliamentary procedure and group dynamics, teachers and students of parliamentary procedure might profitably draw from some of the research and concepts associated with group dynamics. Cattell's theory may be used by parliamentary procedure teachers to provide an understanding of group syntality, which consists in large part of synergy (the total amount of energy that a group brings to bear on its activities), and to offer a perspective on leadership--any behavior that influences group syntality. Teachers can point out such obstacles to effective group decision making as inadequate preparation, hasty decision making, prolonged or imbalanced discussion, insufficient group cohesiveness, and the phenomenon of "groupthink," as discussed by Irving L. Janis, in which groups fail to consider the full range of options available to them in making decisions. The group syntality perspective provides an effective framework for integrating parliamentary rules and relevant principles of group dynamics and also heightens the responsiblity of individual group members. (GT)

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GROUP SYNTALITY

AND

PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE

by

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Group Syntality
and
Parliamentary Procedure

When Robert Frost defined thinking as "taking this and putting it with that" he implied that one can contribute to knowledge not only through finding something never before discovered, but also through combining familiar ideas in unfamiliar ways. Today, we present no new information concerning parliamentary procedure or group dynamics. Rather, any uniqueness in this paper stems from the way in which we combine material from these two subject areas. Specifically, we will explore the relationship between parliamentary procedure and group dynamics and then demonstrate how Cattell's concept of group syntality furnishes a useful framework for teaching parliamentary procedure.

Contrasts

Even the terms parliamentary procedure and group dynamics suggest contrasting areas of study. Whereas a procedure is a particular way of doing something, dynamics, especially as the word is used in the social sciences, denotes the interplay of intangible phenomena. Parliamentary procedure, of course, has roots in centuries of legislative debate and business meetings, while group dynamics has

evolved from the empirical research of sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and communication theorists. Thus, the subject matter of parliamentary procedure consists of a concrete body of rules, many of which have been crystallized in law, whereas group dynamics deals with the more amorphous area of human interactions and personalities.

Textbooks evidence the different directions that parliamentary procedure and group dynamics have taken. Group dynamics textbooks and recent group discussion textbooks do not even mention parliamentary procedure. Moreover, parliamentary procedure books contain little information on such matters as interpersonal finesse beyond the traditional reminders for chairpersons to exercise "common sense" and "flexibility of judgment"[1] and for all members to be tactful and avoid attacking other members' motives.[2]

There are logical reasons for the parliamentary procedure-group dynamics dichotomy. As several writers have indicated, small groups can often use the consensus method of decision making and thereby avoid the formality and restrictiveness of parliamentary procedure, not to mention the polarization that vote taking sometimes fosters.[3] On the other hand, an increase in group size

can change the group character. Research has shown, for example, that the pressure to conform, and, in turn, to reach agreement, decreases as the group size increases. An increase in group size also increases the probability "of splinter groups and cliques."[4]

The unwieldy nature of large groups is that, of course, which necessitates the structure which parliamentary procedure provides and accounts for its distinctive characteristics:

1. The chairperson stands and plays an active and impartial role in a meeting.
2. Members face forward and direct all remarks to the chair.
3. The assembly rather strictly abides by a detailed set of rules and procedures.

Commonalities

Despite the uniqueness of the parliamentary method, the teacher of parliamentary procedure might profitably draw from some of the research and concepts associated with group dynamics. For example, findings on when to use an individual versus when to use a group should help in deciding when it is wise to appoint a committee to examine an issue or carry out a task. Baird and Weinberg

present a complete yet concise method for making such determinations, and parliamentary procedure students could benefit from studying it.[5]

Parliamentary procedure students can also profit from acquaintance with other topics addressed in small group discussion and group dynamics classes. For example, non-verbal communication, group norms, group motivational problems, personality characteristics of group members, and hidden agenda affect large groups as well as small groups.

Application of the Group Syntality Model

One concept which the parliamentary procedure teacher might find particularly useful is what Cattell labeled group personality.[6] Syntality consists in large part of synergy, the total amount of energy that a group brings to bear on its activities. A group can use its synergy for two purposes, achieving the group's goals or maintaining proper group cohesion and harmony. Significantly, a group which needs to use little "maintenance synergy," or which uses it wisely, has more collective energy remaining to apply to the group's substantive tasks. For

example, a group which spends much of its time quarreling or soothing the feelings of offended members has less time and emotional energy to devote to decision-making.

Cattell's theory offers an interesting perspective on leadership. Leadership is any behavior which influences group syntality.[7] As applied to parliamentary procedure we may say that one exercises leadership, regardless of who is the official chairperson, when he/she positively affects how the group performs, either through promoting harmonious relations or through expediting good decision-making. Leadership behaviors thus range from making a humorous remark which lessens tension, to suggesting advantages and disadvantages of a main motion, to moving the previous question when a discussion becomes unprofitable.

The parliamentary procedure teacher can describe the concept of group syntality and then explain how any participant in a meeting can exercise leadership through overcoming obstacles to effective decision-making. The outline below illustrates how this approach might work.

I. Inadequate preparation.

Group discussion textbooks stress that all participants should prepare for a discussion. The idea that every member is to some degree a

leader implies that the same principle applies in parliamentary procedure; the teacher of parliamentary procedure can point out that an improved meeting results when all members, not just the officers and committee members, prepare. For example, members might suggest items for an agenda, or they might study an agenda prior to a meeting and be ready with well thought out, carefully worded motions.

II. Hasty Decision-Making

After pointing out the tendency of some groups to make decisions with insufficient investigation or discussion, the teacher can refer to parliamentary options which a member has, focusing particularly on motions such as to postpone definitely, to postpone temporarily, and to refer to a committee. If a group has made a hasty or unwise decision, there are several recourses, e. g., the motion to reconsider, the motion to rescind, and to repeal or amend by implication.

III. Prolonged Discussion.

This problem indicates the need to confine all remarks to the pending motion and to express oneself as economically as possible. Students should also learn to recognize when a discussion reaches the point of diminishing returns and be familiar with the motions to vote immediately and limit debate.

IV. Imbalanced Discussion.

When speaking of the problem of imbalanced discussion the teacher could remind the students of the guidelines a chairperson uses in choosing whom to recognize, i. e., the proposer of the motion speaks first, members should be allowed to speak a second time on a motion only after all who want to speak have spoken once, and members of opposite viewpoints should take turns speaking.[8] Students should come to recognize that these guidelines represent their rights and that if the chairperson flagrantly violates these rights they might need to rise to a point of order and, if that fails appeal from the the decision from the chair.

Students should also be reminded that inactive participants might have information worth

sharing and that a member might exercise leadership through tactfully drawing such participants into the discussion.

V. Problems With Group Cohesiveness.

Although large groups tend to be less cohesive than small groups, the parliamentary procedure teacher should stress that all groups need at least some cohesiveness. Thus, the importance of maintenance synergy becomes important in the parliamentary meeting. Beene and Sheats suggest four roles of members who help establish proper group relationships:[9]

Encourager: provides support, praise, acceptance for others

Comedian: provides humor, relaxes others

Gatekeeper: controls communication channels, promotes evenness of participation

Follower: accepts ideas of others, goes along with group movement

When discussing group cohesiveness, non-

verbal communication also deserves the parliamentary procedure student's attention. Since nonverbal communication accounts for approximately 65% percent of one's message, it is not enough to encourage members of parliamentary meetings to refrain from attacking other members' motives; abrasive vocalics and facial expressions could cause even the most benign verbal comments to destroy group harmony.

At times interpersonal relations may deteriorate to the point that a group might wisely envoke the parliamentary devices of recessing or adjourning.

VI. Groupthink.

While insufficient cohesiveness may hamper group performance, a high level of cohesiveness can lead to a phenomenon which Janis called groupthink. Through his case studies of foreign policy decisions Janis found that cohesiveness can lead to pitfalls:

First, the group's discussions are limited to a few alternative courses of action (often only two) without a survey of the full range

of alternatives. Second, the group fails to reexamine the course of action initially preferred by the majority of members from the standpoint of nonobvious risks and drawbacks that had not been considered when it was originally evaluated. Third, the members neglect courses of action initially evaluated as unsatisfactory by the majority of the group; they spend little or no time discussing whether they have overlooked nonobvious gains or whether there are ways of reducing the seemingly prohibitive costs that had made the alternative undesirable. Fourth, members make little or no attempt to obtain information from experts who can supply sound estimates of losses and gains to be expected from alternative courses of action. Fifth, selective bias is shown in the way the group reacts to factual information and relevant judgments from experts, the mass media, and outside critics.... Sixth, the members spend little time deliberating about how the chosen policy might be hindered by bureaucratic inertia, sabo-

> taged by political opponents, or temporarily derailed by the common accidents that happen to the best of well-laid plans.[10]

Small groups may be more susceptible to these pitfalls, but parliamentary groups are not immune to groupthink. Measures to counteract groupthink include bringing up perspectives and evidence contrary to the prevailing group opinion, and rising to points of information to request support for opinions which the group might too quickly accept as fact.

The group syntality perspective has at least two advantages. First, it provides an effective framework for integrating parliamentary rules and relevant principles of group dynamics. As such, the group syntality perspective promotes a closer marriage between what we can loosely call the art and science of parliamentary procedure, one stressing interpersonal finesse and the other emphasizing a knowledge of parliamentary rules.

Second, the framework defines the participant's role not in terms of how to use parliamentary procedure to get one's way, but more broadly in terms of how to help the group to efficiently and harmoniously enact wise policy. The group syntality perspective thus heightens the responsibility of the individual member.

Conclusion

The contrasting histories of parliamentary procedure and group dynamics, the different perspectives of those who write parliamentary procedure and group dynamics books, and the differences between large groups and small groups should not lead us to assume that parliamentary procedure and group dynamics do not overlap. Students in group discussion classes should come to recognize the place and significance of parliamentary procedure, and students in parliamentary procedure classes could benefit from taking group discussion or group dynamics classes. Parliamentary procedure students should especially recognize how they can blend information and concepts from these two subject areas.

Where precisely do parliamentary procedure and group dynamics overlap? What specific principles of group dynamics apply in a parliamentary meeting? How can the teacher of parliamentary procedure incorporate group dynamics concepts in the parliamentary procedure classroom? Today we have only explored the issues suggested by these questions, but hopefully we have painted a more complete picture of what it takes to make a well-equipped parliamentary procedure student and an effective parliamentary meeting.

Footnotes

[1]Alice Sturgis, Sturgis Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), p. 162.

[2]Henry M. Robert, Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1970), pp. 331-332.

[3]Some books specify conditions that make parliamentary procedure appropriate. See Ray E. Kessey, Modern Parliamentary Procedure (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), p. 17. Also see J. Jeffery Auer, Essentials of Parliamentary Procedure, 3rd ed. (New York: Appleton-Centruy- Croft, 1959), p. 5.

[4]Carley H. Dodd, Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Communication (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1977), p. 33.

[5]John E. Baird, Jr. and Sanfrod B. Weinberg, Communication: The Essence of Group Synergy (Dubuque Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1977), pp. 16-19.

[6]Raymond B. Cattell, "Concepts and Methods in the Measurement of Group Syntality," Psychological Review, 55 (1948), pp. 48-63. Raymond B. Cattell, "The Dimensions of Syntality in Small Groups," Journal of Social Psychology, 28 (1948), pp. 57-78. Raymond B. Cattell, "New Concepts for Measuring Leadership, in Terms of Group Syntality," Human Relations, 4 (1951), pp. 161-184.

[7]Cattell, "New Concepts for Measuring Leadership, in Terms of Group Syntality," p. 185.

[8]Those who teach parliamentary procedure according to Robert's Rule of Order should point out that Robert's limits a member's "speech" to a maximum of ten minutes and allows a member to speak only twice on a question in a day.

[9]K. Benne and P. Sheats, "Functional Roles of Group Members," Journal of Social Issues, 4 (1948), p. 41-49. This article discusses several types of roles a group member might play.

[10]Irving L. Janis, Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972), p. 10. Courtright provides experimental support for the groupthink theory: John A. Courtright, "A Laboratory Investigation of Groupthink," Communication Monographs, 45 (1978) pp. 229-246.